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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIJING 005233

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TAGS: PHUM KOLY PGOV SOCI KCUL CH

SUBJECT: CHINA KICKS OFF ONE-YEAR COUNTDOWN TO OLYMPICS  
WITH GALA CELEBRATION AS ACTIVISTS RATCHET UP CRITICISMS

REF: A. BEIJING 5187

1B. BEIJING 5142

1C. NEW DELHI 3617

Classified By: Political Minister Counselor Aubrey Carlson.  
Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary and Comment

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11. (C) China kicked off the one-year countdown to the Beijing Olympic Games with an impressive ceremony in front of Chairman Mao's portrait in Tiananmen Square August 8. Politburo Standing Committee Member Wu Bangguo gave the keynote address, reiterating Beijing's commitment to conduct a "humane" Olympics and pledging to provide "excellent service" to journalists. Earlier, Jiang Xiaoyu, Executive Vice President of the Beijing Organizing Committee for the 29th Olympiad Games (BOCOG), told a visiting U.S. Congressman that Beijing will allow journalistic access but cautioned that China expects Olympics coverage to be "fair, objective and optimistic." Comment: Beijing faces growing public relations and policy challenges as activists gear up to use the Olympics as a lever to pressure China on their issues. Equally evident is the fact that the "open coverage" mantra of the Party leadership has been slow to translate into policy on the ground. End Summary and Comment.

Olympic Countdown Kickoff

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12. (U) With Poloff in attendance amidst the sweltering Beijing heat, BOCOG orchestrated an impressive two-hour gala ceremony in front of Chairman Mao's portrait in Tiananmen Square on the evening of August 8 to mark the one-year countdown to the Beijing Olympic Games. Zhang Yimou, renowned Chinese film director and artistic director for the 2008 opening ceremony, observed the four-segment program nervously. With the exception of a Swedish pianist and vocalist, who sang in Chinese, the performances showcased traditional Chinese and ethnic artistic genres and included celebrities such as movie star Jackie Chan, NBA star Yao Ming and pianist Lang Lang. A 100-voice choir sang the one-year countdown theme song, "We Are Ready."

13. (U) IOC President Jacques Rogge formally invited the National Olympic Committees (NOCs) from 205 participating territories and countries to attend next year's big event and handed out invitations to NOC representatives from Canada, the United Kingdom and Russia, the host countries for the next three Olympics (Vancouver 2010, London 2012 and Sochi 2014). Beijing Mayor and BOCOG Executive President Wang Qishan was Master of Ceremonies, while Politburo Standing Committee Member and National People's Congress Chairman Wu Bangguo gave the keynote address. Wu stuck to the catchphrases of the Beijing Games, promising to conduct a "humane" Olympics that would embody the Olympic motto of

"Swifter, Higher and Stronger." He said China would uphold its pledge to provide "excellent service" to journalists, without specifically mentioning access or press freedoms. Beijing Party Secretary and BOCOG President Liu Qi and Minister of Sport and BOCOG Executive President Liu Peng also made remarks.

#### Press Coverage with Chinese Characteristics

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¶4. (C) In an earlier meeting with a visiting U.S. Member of Congress on August 8, BOCOG Executive Vice President Jiang Xiaoyu reiterated Beijing's pledge to allow journalistic access during the Olympics, stating that China "welcomes global media coverage," including reporting on China's "problems." Jiang cautioned, however, that China hopes the coverage would be "fair, objective and optimistic." The Olympics will spur China to move forward on human rights and social development, Jiang maintained, emphasizing that China "continues to oppose making all problems political" or linking them to the Olympics. The Olympics is "a large basket into which anything can be dumped," including Tibet, Falun Gong and human rights, he added, but it is "unrealistic" to expect China or any other Olympics host to bear the burden of solving all problems through the Games. (Note: Bloomberg News quoted IOC President Jacques Rogge as making similar comments on August 8, saying that "any expectation that the IOC should apply pressure on the Chinese government beyond what is necessary for the Games' preparations is misplaced.... The Games can only be a catalyst for change, not a panacea." Rogge also reportedly said he will press China on media access and environmental programs without getting involved in "political issues.")

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¶5. (C) Tsinghua University scholar Qin Hui (protect) separately on August 8 summed up the Government's media and public relations approach to the Olympics as an "internally strict, externally lax" (nei jin wai song) policy. In other words, he told Poloff, China will attempt to appear more open to the outside world in advance of the Games, while keeping a tight lid on dissent at home. Referring to the high-profile outlawing of six books earlier this year, Qin said that as the Olympics draw near, China will refrain from banning books post-publication. Instead, Chinese officials will ratchet up pressure on publishers behind the scenes to prevent controversial works from being printed in the first place, a method which officials hope will avoid drawing international attention to China's lack of free speech.

#### Public Relations Pitfalls not Going away Soon

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¶6. (C) Activist groups are gearing up to use the Games as a lever to pressure China on human rights and other issues. A partial listing of groups recently using the Olympics to voice criticisms of China would include 39 Chinese activists and liberal intellectuals who released an "open letter" on the morning of the August 8 countdown ceremony to call upon top Party leaders to improve the human rights situation in China (Ref A). That letter was issued a day after the U.S.-based Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) held a press conference in Beijing to announce the release of a report highly critical of China's record on press freedom in advance of the Olympic Games (Ref B). The day before that event, Reporters Without Borders (RSF) staged a similar event to protest Chinese press restrictions, resulting in the detention of several RSF representatives. In addition, Chinese interlocutors have taken note of the high-profile efforts of Hollywood celebrities and others in recent months to spearhead a publicity campaign using the Olympics to pressure China into taking action on Darfur. Meanwhile, the Chinese are carefully watching the progress of several Congressional resolutions and letters calling for an Olympics boycott if China does not call a halt to human rights abuses.

On top of all that, this week a group of foreign activists was detained for unfurling on the Great Wall a banner calling for a "free Tibet," while thousands of Tibetans staged a demonstration in New Delhi on August 8 (Ref C).

Open Coverage Mantra Slow to Become Reality

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17. (C) In the meantime, Party censors at the grassroots have apparently been slow to translate into practice the central government's message on open press coverage for the Games. As anecdotal evidence, on the morning of August 8, a Washington TDY analyst noticed that the day's International Herald Tribune was not in its customary display case in the lobby of Beijing's China World Hotel. Upon inquiring, she was told by the desk clerk that the latest edition had been removed from the shelves but that he could retrieve a copy for her. When she mentioned that it looked like some pages were missing, the clerk acknowledged that "we removed some pages because they contained bad news." Indeed, the Embassy's (uncensored) copy of that day's issue revealed that page three carried a story on Beijing's preparations for the Olympics, including negative comments by China's critics. The article reported upbeat comments made by official at a BOCOG press conference but noted that "critics warned that China may fall short on Olympic commitments on the environment, human rights and press freedom." The piece reported in some detail on various groups who are "seizing on the one-year countdown to attract attention to their causes."

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